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SUBJECT: RUSLAN KHASBULATOV ON CHECHEN DYNAMICS

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Kirk Augustine.
Reason 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Ruslan Khasbulatov, Yeltsin's opponent in the 1993 White House standoff and now professor of economics at the Plekhanov Russian Academy of Economics, gave us his perspective June 27 on dynamics in his native Chechnya. Khasbulatov was upfront about his dislikes in the current political alignment (virtually everyone in power in both Moscow and Groznyy); he did not appear to have many likes. He had much to say about Shamil Basayev, with whom he was closely linked in the early 1990s; now he was willing to admit he had met Basayev, no more.

¶2. (C) Khasbulatov noted that the current dynamic pitted the extreme Basayev, disliked by the population, against Kadyrov -- whom Khasbulatov regarded as odious -- and his federal backers. That was lucky for Kadyrov; if the populace had other channels to express its opposition to Kadyrov and the Russians, it would. As things stood, however, anyone who expressed opposition could be labeled a "Basayevist" and arrested or worse. So the people, intimidated, remained silent and passive.

¶3. (C) Khasbulatov claimed that Basayev was working for the KGB in 1993 when he transited Russia and entered Abkhazia to fight the Georgians. Khasbulatov also claimed that Basayev to this day had no religious convictions, and that his invasion of Dagestan in 1999, along with the Jordanian Jihadist al-Khattab, was done for a purely financial motive: he was paid USD 10 million. Khasbulatov, learning of the plans, had sent an ex-fighter trusted by Basayev to try to dissuade Basayev from the disastrous move. Khasbulatov said, "The man later told me that Basayev replied, 'Ruslan will never give bad advice, but it comes too late: I've already taken the money.'"

¶4. (C) Khasbulatov believed Basayev long ago gave up hope of achieving independence for Chechnya or a pan-Caucasian Islamic state. But Basayev had no other path, and would keep fighting until the end. It had become a way of life for him. Therein lay the danger: Kadyrov's forces were nothing more than mercenaries. That allowed Russia to control Kadyrov, since Moscow could cut off Kadyrov's funding at any time, and his fighters would disappear. But it also meant that the fighters could defect to Basayev any time he offered them enough money. For that reason, Khasbulatov believed Federal forces would have to stay in Chechnya for a long time to come.

¶5. (C) Khasbulatov repeatedly called for international conferences in Groznyy -- on economic reconstruction, education, health, and environmental rehabilitation -- to focus and increase international aid as part of the healing process. He believed the UN was "inert" on Chechnya, and said he had told Kofi Annan so himself. He believed Chechnya needed more international attention, despite Russian policy that defines the issue as internal; Russian-backed "reconstruction" efforts were a sham, in his view.

¶6. (C) Comment: Khasbulatov, slight, handsome and courtly, sees himself as the elder statesman of the Chechen intelligentsia. He railed against the "talentless," "empty" people, Russians and Chechens alike, to whom Moscow has over the years entrusted the solution of the Chechen problem. He was especially scathing about Russia's post-Soviet security services, whom, he said, Basayev has penetrated. He was equally unsparing in his criticism of late Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov. Khasbulatov clearly believes the majority of the Chechen population thinks as he does and has no sympathy for either the pro-Russians or the insurgents. The conferences he proposes could potentially be useful -- but if Russians are afraid to go to Chechnya, it is not likely that foreign conference-goers will be willing to go there, either.

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